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Goods and Ethnicity: Trade and Bazaars in Laos from a Gift Perspective

A Discussion

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With commentaries from Chris Gregory, Kostas Retsikas and Hans Peter Hahn

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Abstract: Drawing on ethnographic observations in Lao markets and bazaars, this article proposes a new and experimental framework for the analysis of multi-ethnic trading. It explores bazaars and trade as sites of the (re-)production of ethnicity through the perspective of gift exchange theory. On markets, transcultural differences can be identified and stabilized through the exchange of goods and money. This draws attention to the role of trade items as foci – and perhaps even as non-human agents – in the emergence of ethnicity and other forms of local identity. The value of items' specific origins is thus linked to social structure. This helps us to see how the shaping of group identity can be better understood by considering how the goods they bring to market carry with them some features of the gift.

Classically, anthropologists have argued that gift exchange and commodity transfers are fundamentally separate types of relationships. According to this scheme, gift exchange constitutes lasting social and cosmic relationships, while the market consists of short-term, amoral and anonymous transfers of commodities. At the same time, markets are seen as institutions that work separately from, and often against, society in general. However, in recent decades this distinction has been duly criticized. Although it might be of analytical value, the assumption that markets are disembedded from society does not seem to hold—whether in non-modern or modern contexts. Granovetter (1985) and Hefner (1998) have argued, *pace* Polanyi (1995 [1944]), that the differentiation of markets in a market economy – or in capitalism – does not imply that markets are isolated from social and cultural

processes. Markets also contain long-term relationships with moral dimensions—and this is even true for modern capitalist markets, as Carrier (1997) has pointed out.

If markets are not anonymous, they thus can be sites of the (re-)production of social and cultural identities, groups and categories—ethnicity being the focus of this paper. The question is how such identities and relationships are created and stabilized under conditions of the market. We would expect that certain features of gift exchange play a role in markets, insofar as such exchanges are a significant means of reproducing social identities via transfers—among them the inalienability of the gift and its role in the articulation of difference between givers and takers.

This article experimentally proposes a new framework for the analysis of multi-ethnic

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trading. It explores bazaars and trade as sites of the (re-)production of ethnicity through the perspective of gift exchange theory. On markets, transcultural differences can be identified and stabilized through the exchange of goods and money. This draws attention to the role of trade items as foci – and perhaps even as non-human agents – in the emergence of ethnicity and other forms of local identity. The value of items' specific origins is thus linked to social structure. In what follows, I explore how the shaping of group identity can be better understood by considering how the goods people bring to markets carry with them some features of the gift. Not all goods have these features—after all, among the most important effects of markets, and of commodity exchange, is their potential for cutting short relationships of origin, and making relationships less personal and less durable.

My aim in this connection is comparatively modest. It is to show that some exchanges that take place through markets are not free from the qualities of gift exchange. This accounts for the reproduction of ethnicity in markets. It also speaks to an open model of the gift that forms an encompassing mode of transfer in general, of which markets are a specific type. Their specificity consists in keeping identities and obligations at a low level of intensity.

These reflections are based on a model situation derived from my fieldwork in Laos that resonates with further examples from Southeast Asia and other areas. I will thus bolster the theoretical argument with my admittedly rather limited data, and with my more general impressions of trading and bazaars in this country. While trading is crucial for the understanding of Southeast Asia, and has often been identified as one of the features that defines the region, there has been fairly little research on the topic in Laos.

Crossing Commodities with Gifts

The current emergence of new markets in Southeast Asian countries, be they capitalist or

post-socialist, is closely associated with new connections to a globalized capitalist economy (Hefner 1998). This implies the growing importance of a particular type of relationship between persons, objects and services—one through which objects and services may become alienable from persons, and in which their value can be expressed in terms of money. Such relations are associated with the notion of the commodity, and commodification as the process by which an increasing number of objects and services – and ultimately persons – become potentially exchangeable on the market. This is usually modeled in modern economic terms. Rational actors intentionally decide to exchange objects and services for money, in order to acquire other objects and services. Neither long-term relationships nor relational identities need to arise from these transactions.

This model has been identified as part of a culture that is specific to Western modernity, and not necessarily applicable to other societies (e.g. Carrier 1997, Dumont 1977). Also, it conceals fundamental questions that need to be asked about any exchange. For instance, how does value come about? How is it that the items that are being exchanged are considered exchangeable in the first place? How are they thus related? How are they related to the persons who transfer them, to their origins and to their biographies? And how does this relatedness condition the exchange? In short, how is sociality reproduced as a process embodying meaningful and valued relations? ¹

These questions are addressed in analyses of gift exchange. Gift exchange theory posits an analytical difference between gifts and commodities. In this definition, gifts are the means of perpetuating long-term cycles of exchange (Gregory 1982, Parry & Bloch 1991). They literally embody lasting social relationships that are conceived as being constitutive of an overall socio-cosmic order. This they do by representing their origins and their givers—'to represent', here, not in the sense of a separation between signifier and signified, but as 'to make

¹ In this context, I prefer *sociality* over *society*, defining sociality as a particular, differentiated mode of producing and maintaining social relationships. The term stresses the processual character of the social that lies in expectations and potentials of future communications. Kinship, for example, relates a different range of people in a different manner than market exchange. They are thus different socialities. Socialities are thus not necessarily coextensive with those entities commonly named (national or ethnic) societies, but may extend beyond them.

present anew' (Coppet 1992: 71). They contain values and identities associated with their sources. Their exchange valorizes them in relation to each other, and their value is also part of the relationship they help to create or maintain. Relating such exchange items with one another means relating their origins as coupled pairs of values (see Barraud et al. 1994). Thus, they create relationships between social categories, thereby constituting the difference between them as necessary and complementary. In this respect, gifts 'make present anew' relationships which are moral in a Durkheimian sense of the term—i.e., they are relationships that make an encompassing social order possible (Godelier 1999).

In contrast, commodities are transferred in short-term exchanges. These focus on the objects and their consumer, not on their origin. They might be expressive of status or rank. However, it is not necessarily their origin that conveys this status on their owner, but rather the mere fact of ownership. The exchange by which they are acquired does not create or recognize lasting relationships between giver and taker. Such relationships are characteristic of market exchange and the use of modern money. They relate objects to people by subordinating them to their owners. One could even argue that this type of exchange helps to create the category of 'objects' in the first place—a category that is ontologically subordinated to a category of subjects that is able to own them. There is no room for negotiation here. An object is as fundamentally an object as a subject is a subject (Dumont 2013). It is precisely this reasoning, separating subjects from objects, that makes the transfer of persons – as in bridewealth arrangements – so morally objectionable, if seen in terms of commodity exchange.

However, there is nothing objectionable about commodities in a general sense. As I will argue below, just as some exchanges are necessary to create lasting ties, others are needed to prevent such ties from becoming overly complex. Gift exchanges need to be complemented by commodity transfers. Commodity exchange frequently offers a form of exchange that does not necessarily carry any obligation with it, thus reducing the complexity of social life.

For this reason, the analytical distinction between gifts and commodities was never meant

to be absolute. This is not because social reality is always messy by necessity, in comparison to the neat models by which scholars try to capture it. It is because the model that separates gifts and commodities refers to qualities of relationships and not to the essence of the items being exchanged. These qualities are relational—gifts and commodities draw attention to the place one particular exchange has within a system of exchanges.

The question is thus not so much, to which type of relationship does an exchange belong? It is rather, which transfers and communications condition and follow one particular exchange? What context is created or evoked by it? Which values are put into tension within this context? Here it must be borne in mind that no individual transfer can be isolated from the other transfers with which it is connected. Only in relation to those other transfers can we identify a given transfer as comprising a gift and/or a commodity.

Therefore, items that are transferred as commodities may possess some features of gifts (see also Kopytoff 1986). Commodities may also represent relations that are valorized regarding their origin and the identity it confers on them, even if the relationships in play are less personal and durable than in gift exchange. Provenance is an illustrative example. A book from Goethe's private library will be worth more than the same book with an indeterminate provenance. Still, the buyer and the seller of this book might have no lasting relationship otherwise. The exchange takes place in a context defined in terms of the commodity. Such gift-tinged commodities may play a part in constituting the ontological and social identity of the persons who initiate the exchange, even in contexts like markets.

Transculturality in particular is a situation in which such questions arise. Transculturality is understood here in Welsch's (1999) sense, as the multiple legibility of cultural representations. This implies that communications – including exchanges and the meaning of the objects or services transacted – are differentially linked in different social systems. Therefore, a single transaction can be part of more than one social system, where it connects to other communications (Sprenger 2011, 2016b). This way, transcultural exchanges challenge both the gift and the commodity perspective on exchange. They are problematic as gift exchange, as this type of

exchange usually requires that the transactors share the same value system, while cultural difference implies differences in values. From a commodity perspective, this is not a problem, as objects and their origins are conveniently separated from each other by the use of money. Transactors do not need to have anything in common beyond accepting money for the exchange in order to trade across cultural boundaries. The problem for a commodity perspective rather lies in the fact that transcultural exchange supports the emergence of cultural identities. This subverts the alienability of exchange items. When the exchange value of an item partially lies in its origin in a particular cultural context, alienability remains incomplete.

Transcultural exchange thus presents a paradox, which I will address in a series of arguments, focusing in the first instance on the notion of the gift.

1. *Gift exchanges are asymmetric.* This is not just because people have different needs and therefore give away what they do not need, in order to get what they need. While this concept has been central for economics, it has been identified as characteristic of modern ideology (Graeber 2012, Mauss 1991 [1926], Sahlins 2000; for modern ideology see Dumont 1977, 1990). I presume that the idea of asymmetric needs and means is just one instance of a more encompassing condition of asymmetry—one specific mode that is neither universal nor restricted to modern economies (although it is quite prominent in them).

This general asymmetry supports the differentiation of social relationships. Givers and takers of particular items – objects, services and persons – establish differentiated relations with each other via exchange, starting by the mere fact that everyone involved gives and takes different things. Therefore, exchange establishes difference as the base of sociality (e.g. Foster 1990). If gifts are a means for, and a function of, the establishment and maintenance of constitutive social relationships, then the value of the gift corresponds with the value of the relationship by which it is transferred. These relationships reproduce the social (or the

cosmos), and the gifts are their appearance in action and matter—the representation of the relation in the sense of ‘making present anew’ (Coppet 1991). Even seemingly symmetric gift exchanges actually often create double asymmetries (Godelier 1999: 63-64, Barraud et al. 1994).²

This asymmetry thus implies non-equivalence. Equivalence, the principle of commodity exchange, amounts to a denial of the difference of value between two items.

2. *If gifts are being reciprocated, two values are linked to each other in a complementary way.* By this operation they create a new, virtual whole. The two values – represented by gifts, but actually being relationships – move from being simply different to being necessary but asymmetric parts of a whole. A classic example is the shell valuables of the Melanesian Kula exchange designated as ‘male’ and ‘female’. Thus, when a ‘male’ shell is exchanged for a ‘female’ one, the two values form a unit through the idea of a sexual union producing offspring (Malinowski 1922). These values are thus value-ideas (Dumont 2013); their difference is qualitative and cannot be measured.

As gifts are not defined by their intrinsic, but rather their relational value, they are valorized by their unbroken relationship with their origin. This phenomenon has been discussed in terms of the inalienability of the gift. Gifts form part of the initial giver’s person, or represent their (often cosmological) origin. By virtue of this relationship, the receivers partake in the person of the giver, or in the cosmological domain represented by the gift (e.g. Platenkamp 1996, Weiner 1992).

3. *Persons – and also other entities involved in exchange – acquire much of their identity through the difference articulated by exchange asymmetry.* People are socially different because they actively or passively participate in difference-producing exchanges. This has been demonstrated for caste in India (Marriott 1976) and gender in Melanesia (Strathern 1988). But it covers other types of differences as well, including ethnicity. Exchange allows for the conceptualization of diversity, as

² Godelier’s example is sister exchange in marriage among Baruya. In this, two men do not exchange one woman for another woman – i.e. essentialized individuals – but one sister each for a wife, i.e. they exchange relationships. This double asymmetry leads to their lasting bond as brothers-in-law.

features of social entities can be accounted for in terms of their respective relatedness.

In this regard, exchanging gifts is an experience of foreignness and 'possession', in the double meaning of the term—the Other becomes a part of the self as one of its defining features; the taker possesses and is in turn possessed (Moebius 2009).

Therefore, the exchange between foreigners, members of different societies, can be addressed in terms of gift exchange. It is a way to integrate the stranger while at the same time acknowledging her/his foreignness. It also reproduces relationships without working towards assimilation, as a denial of difference (Platenkamp 2014).

One specific example of this relationship is the Stranger King, a legendary motif found in Southeast Asia as well as in Polynesia, Africa and other parts of the world. This figure locates the origin of a polity in a stranger who brings extraordinary powers to the locality, but needs to enter into an exchange relationship with the autochthonous population, usually by marriage, in order to create a stable and continuous polity. This relationship is reproduced through ritual exchanges between kings and subjects in subsequent generations. The king thus at once defines the polity and remains a conceptual stranger (Sahlins 2008).

In some cases this figure provides a model for other forms of exchange (e.g. marital exchanges), although the idea that people and objects from afar carry vitality and life-force is not featured in all gift exchanges. However, the asymmetry of exchange maintains a necessary difference that is also a difference between societies. Exchange makes it possible to construe categories for, and relations with, the foreign.

This is also true for commodity exchange, even when the separation of the goods from their origin and the focus on their need-satisfying features – i.e., those relating to their destination, not to their origin – seem dominant. Insofar as the nature and origin of the commodities play a decisive role in their transfer, some features of the gift may be maintained even in commodity exchange, in order to create or support categories of social relations, persons and items. It is these features of commodities that create lasting, qualified relationships and identities.

4. *Exchange is a crucial feature of transculturality as a way to construct, address and reproduce cultural difference.* A setting in which cultural differences are omnipresent and palpable – as in Laos, but perhaps in the wider world as well – demands the emergence of a codification of such differences. The asymmetry of the exchange, and the difference between givers and takers, provide a means to conceptualize cultural difference in practice. Recent developments in exchange theory have included a reading of Mauss that privileges the exchange between societies – instead of within societies – as the basic model (Därmann 2010, Moebius 2009).

If exchange works to construct the identity of the exchanging parties, it presents an important means of conceptualizing (and operationalizing) the emergence and maintenance of transculturality. Transculturality, in this sense, does not blur the difference between societies or cultural configurations. Rather, by relating societies, transculturality specifies their difference in terms of the very (exchange) relationship between them—that is, a relationship that produces difference as the condition of its existence. Exchange establishes cultural difference as a function of communication, by virtually constituting exchange partners as culturally different. Just as asymmetric values are linked in momentary wholes, cultural identities emerge from exchange as mutually defined by their difference. From the perspective both of theory, and of the local actors themselves, cultural difference thereby becomes comprehensible not as the result of problematic random encounters, but as a way to conceptualize valorized differences between exchange partners. Perceived differences can be accounted for in terms of categories of exchange relationships. These valorize and classify differences, thereby helping to create the categories of people involved. Here, potentials for the emergence of distinct ethnic and local identities become actualized.

5. *The items themselves are agents.* This is a wide-reaching issue that can only be touched upon very briefly here. A range of theorists from Marcel Mauss (1991: 86, n.132, 107-118, e.g., n. 230) to Tim Ingold (2010) have argued that things are, in one way or another, part of the social process, due to their particular qualities, their durability, their relations with other materials, their nutritional value, the possibility to keep them, break them or put them together

(see also Appadurai 1986, Latour 2008). This is where gifts and commodities intersect. Gifts, in many exchange theories, sometimes appear as mere objects of a given socio-cosmic exchange structure. In this view, it is the relations between persons that are important, the objects being mere signifiers, chosen almost arbitrarily. In this perspective, it is the giver of the object who demands most analytical attention.

The commodity perspective would argue for the opposite: The objects are desired for their intrinsic qualities, and the relations that transfer them are subordinate to these qualities. In this view, it is the taker – the ‘consumer’ – who must be considered foremost, as his/her needs trigger the exchange (for a perspective on taking from the gift perspective, see Retsikas 2016).

What is lacking from both views are the qualities of the items, as they appear to givers and takers alike. Items impact the relations by which they are transferred due to their specific qualities that can be activated when they pass through their social life. In a way, an item can relate to another actor because it ‘turns toward’ him/her/it by revealing, in the relationship, a particular quality it possesses. The physical qualities, say, of the copper plates exchanged in the potlatches of the Pacific Northwest Coast inform (but do not determine) the relationships they might establish. They can be shaped and broken up, distributed and put together again, or thrown into the sea. Examples given below include the taste of rice varieties and the service life of electric appliances—qualities that can be perceived only when the items enter into a relationship with persons and other things. These qualities become part of the network of relations by which they are created, and that they help to create. In this sense the notion of ‘intrinsic qualities’ is misleading. These are relational potentialities which emerge in particular contexts, when items are used or become active. This is why exchange items are sometimes persons, ranging from marital partners to the ‘living’ copper plates of the American Northwest Coast (see also Sprenger 2016a). As Mauss (1991 [1924]) observed, the plates that are exchanged during potlatches may be understood as being alive. The social processes by which they are transferred are partially attributed to their own agency. In this respect, some of the most prestigious exchange items in Southeast Asia – such as bronze drums

and cattle – verge on embodying personhood in their own right (Sprenger 2016a, Lundström & Tayanin 1981). But, if exchange items convey personhood or identity, they must have identities and features of personhood themselves—even if only in a minor fashion.

This also implies that the reproduction of constitutive relations does not mean the more-or-less successful copying of a past or ideal pattern. Concepts and things interact continuously, creating ‘wholes’, relationships, values, actors and biographies along the way. If these points serve to establish gift exchange as a means of conveying identities in a transcultural situation, the question then becomes one of how markets and trade fit into this pattern.

Trade as a Function of Gift Exchange

Anthropologists have not tired of stressing that, against economic common sense, markets are neither socially nor culturally neutral (e.g. Applbaum 2012, Geertz 1978, Plattner 1985). They have shown how social ties emerge in the course of doing business—ties that shape interactions in the long term. They have also demonstrated how culturally specific needs shape markets (Bestor 2001). I resist saying that markets are framed by culture and society, as frame often suggests a constraint, a boundary of possibilities. Rather, markets are enabled by society and culture. As any other institution, they are emergent phenomena, and the conditions of their existence are constraining and enabling to the same degree.

Seen from this perspective, bazaars – and markets more generally – are not just places where individuals satisfy their needs. They rather are a particular type of site in which the identities and the status of the elements of social interaction are constituted by exchange.

Some anthropologists have argued for a separation between *markets* as particular sites for the transfer of commodities, on the one hand, and *the market* as a generalized encompassing phenomenon in (capitalist) market economies, on the other. Others, meanwhile, have tried to bridge this gap (Applbaum 2012). Although my present concern is mostly with bazaars as sites for the transfer of commodities, the difference between the two institutions is not crucial for my argument about gifts and commodities. In both

cases, ethnicity and origin do occur as markers of the identity of goods.

Ethnic marketing is presumably much older than the current-day commodification of 'primordial' and 'authentic' ethnicity (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009) might suggest. As I will argue below, ethnicity is an important way to identify goods on a bazaar as well. There is, however, a reversal: (post-)modern ethnic marketing attempts to make 'primordial' ethnicity available on the market (e.g. as handicrafts or performances). However, the forms of ethnic marketing I am dealing with here help to make ethnicity in the first place. The condition for this is an embedded market in which goods are not entirely distinct from their origin.

Several authors have identified the severance of the social origin of goods as a distinctive feature of trade. Michel Callon (2006), for instance, has pointed out the relation between embeddedness and disembedding that characterizes markets. The work of markets consists in cutting relationships between goods and their origins, in order to enable calculation as a process. In a similar vein, Tsing (2013) has argued that the value of commodities emerges from stripping features of the gift from items that are originally culturally embedded. Tsing here equates commodity transactions with capitalism. But Hart (2000) has, by contrast, argued that trade, markets and money are universal potentials of human society, while capitalism and profit maximizing are not. One is thus inclined to ask which function commodity exchange and trade might have—that is, beyond the satisfaction of individual needs, which could be served equally well by gift exchange.

The question draws attention to an aspect of gift exchange that has so far attracted comparatively little attention—namely, gifts of separation. Examples are the closing gifts in Kula exchanges (Weiner 1983: 162-163), or mortuary gifts for wife-givers that terminate the flow of gifts and services between wife-givers and wife-takers among Rmeet in Laos (Sprenger 2006). These gifts signal the end of an extended transaction, although, as in the Rmeet case, they fail to end the relationships for good. But they do provide the opportunity for new generations of gift cycles to emerge, involving new actors. They reduce the complexity of obligatory relationships.

Thus, while commodity relationships are difficult to make permanent, gift relationships are difficult to stop. If every transfer were a commodity transfer, no society could exist. If every transfer were a gift exchange, societies would become unbearably complex. Therefore, actors in commodity exchanges try to borrow elements of gift exchange in order to make relationships more durable—like rebates, guarantees or bonus programs. Gift exchange systems, on the other hand, require methods for curtailing relationships that would otherwise proliferate endlessly.

The relationships between gifts and commodities therefore demand careful management. Platenkamp (2012, n.21) provides a particularly apt example from Tobelo, eastern Indonesia. Killing can only be achieved by the ancestors, therefore all means of killing – from guns to fishhooks – must be possessed by the ancestors, otherwise they would be ineffective. For that reason, the price of any given means of killing cannot be negotiated on the market, as the buyer and seller can only agree upon the value of an item in terms of money when the seller actually owns it. Negotiating a price would therefore deny the item's relationship with the ancestors, and so render it incapable of killing.

For the same reason, I surmise, Buddhist amulets in Thailand do not have a 'price' (*rakha*). While there is a very lively market for these objects, the money given in exchange for them is called 'rent' or 'worship value' (Jackson 1999: 10-11). Turning them into common commodities by equating their value with money would cut off their relationship with their spiritual origin.

These are just a few examples that demonstrate how relationships are managed in terms of gift and commodity exchange. In some cases, relationships with origins are valorized and carefully maintained, while in others they can be neglected. Presumably, both long-term and short-term relationships are important in any society. Gift exchange systems contain specific means to curtail these relationships, but commodity exchange provides an elaborate system of multiple opportunities of keeping relationships from proliferating.

Thus, I argue, the market is not just an operator of disembedding, but rather of selective disentangling. Certain features of goods

that refer to their origins are retained and others muted. It is a matter of the culturally specific code of relationships that operates on a given market, which determines how this selective disembedding occurs. The cutting of relationships does not only serve the possibility to calculate. It also serves as an alternative to the obligations produced by the gift.

This argument implies not only that markets are never fully disembedded. It also suggests that features of gift exchange, like inalienability, seep in and are continued on markets.

Markets thus appear as functions of larger systems of transaction, which can themselves be understood in terms of gift exchange. Here gift exchange does not appear in opposition to market exchange, and gifts are not opposed to commodities. Rather, gift exchange provides an encompassing model of sociality that allows for variation, including its own partial reversals. In a gift exchange system, the severance of relationships remains an important factor—otherwise, it would soon result in an unmanageably complex array of obligations. On the market, this potential for cutting off relations appears in its most systematic form. The fact that separations occur in a selective way betrays the strong link that goods retain with the logic of the gift.

This is particularly clear when goods are used to define group identities that might on other occasions constitute exchange spheres, domains of kinship or ethno-national commitment. Ethnicity and other forms of cultural identity emerge from intersections between groups and categories of people who value being distinct. Both gift exchange and markets play a role in this process of differentiation. The market does so as a site of multilateral, highly variable and selectively alienable relationships. But it can also do so by retaining some features of gift exchange.

The relationship between ethnicity and markets has been analyzed from various perspectives. According to Geertz (1978: 30-31), a central problem of bazaars is the availability of information. On this account, bazaars reduce the complexity of supply – numerous retailers with goods in many different qualities – by channeling information. The ethnicization of retailers or goods is one such strategy, in that it helps customers to identify desirable goods. So,

for instance, making one's group membership visible (e.g. through clothing) communicates a relationship with particular goods. It is therefore unsurprising that upland women in Laos tend to dress in distinct 'ethnic' clothing when going to bazaars that are strongly dominated by female traders. This might not be an exhaustive explanation of the complex use of distinct costume, but it is certainly one of its effects (Sprenger 2017).

Another dimension of ethnicity is the cultural differentiation of trading groups in peasant societies, which Evers (1994) has described in terms of the 'trader's dilemma'. Evers presumes that traders are caught in a conundrum: For protection they need stable relationships with producing communities; but the moral economies of these communities, which are geared to equalize wealth by redistribution, drain their profits. One solution to this dilemma is cultural differentiation—e.g., traders may become migrants or followers of different religious practices. They may even undergo a process of ethnogenesis and emerge as an 'ethnic' category, by adopting and varying the types and markers of ethnic difference in their surroundings (e.g. by acquiring an ethnonym, costume, rituals, a tendency for endogamy). This perspective, which is based on an implicit maximizing paradigm, can be augmented with the approach I wish to propose. Given that trade serves to sever relationships with origins that are marked by ethnicity, it makes sense that the agents of this selective severance are of a different ethnicity or cultural identity. They thus function as catalysts who 'purify' items for transfer across the boundaries of gift exchange networks. Thus, in certain cases, ethnicity serves to differentiate producers and traders (Schlee 2004).

Graeber (2001: 103-4) also suggests that what appears to be economic efficiency might just as well be seen as identity management. The creation of coins that carried the identity of particular principalities – through, e.g., the faces of rulers and gods – was then not a way to make trade easier but to extend the authority and identity of these polities to the market. Again, it was the constitution of social difference and identity via exchange that was at issue.

The foregoing examples stress differing ways to relate ethnicity to trade and markets, with the

item's origin figuring centrally in each case. This may appear in the form of a value that needs to be retained (e.g., as an indication of quality in a bazaar, or of exchange value for coins). Or, alternatively, ethnicity may be seen to work as a catalyst that severs relationships. Yet, in both instances, the gift's inalienability is retained – especially in those cases where goods and ethnicity are explicitly linked.

In this sense, markets and trade enable transculturality—not by neutralizing cultural representations through a reduction to their potential to satisfy needs, but through the marking of their origin as culturally distinct. They are thus productive of the difference they manage. In this way, trade and commodity exchange serve two functions in regard to an encompassing model of gift exchange. First, they reduce the complexity of obligations that arises from giving and taking in gift exchange contexts. In this regard, they are functionally equivalent to the closure gifts found in many exchange systems. However, while the latter figure as part of gift systems, trade and commodity exchange emerge as separate – but not isolated – systems in their own right (Sprenger 2014).

Second, and in contrast to the first function, markets and trade retain certain features of the gift, in particular its identity-building functions. Groups and categories of people – with ethnic groups taken as one specific form – are identified as the origins of the goods they provide. This is the transcultural aspect of gift exchange and markets. Gift exchange, as it is based on asymmetry and non-equivalence, posits givers and takers as qualitatively different. This process supports the semantic elaboration and codification of differences between groups, in terms of culture. Thus, a market which retains the identity of groups and products also extends the inalienability of the gift and its asymmetric construction of ethnicity.

Ethnic Diversity and Bazaars in Laos

In the following, I want to provide an ethnographic example concerning ethnicity, markets and politics in Laos. Historically, ethnic difference played a crucial role in the formation of modern Laos. The country is culturally highly diverse, and only a little more than half of the population currently (in 2017) identifies as ethnic

Lao. Thus, ethnicity and cultural difference are constitutive factors of social structure in Laos. Most conspicuous is the difference between Buddhist Lao lowlanders, autochthonous speakers of Mon-Khmer languages who preceded the Lao, and speakers of Tibeto-Burmese and Hmong-Mien languages who have arrived from China since the 19th century. The non-Lao, who today are classified into 48 officially recognized ethnic categories, mostly live in rural and mountain villages—areas where immediate control by the state remains comparatively weak. The region is structured according to a complex of value hierarchies, marked by tension between centers and peripheries; states and non-centralized societies; cities and villages in the plains practicing wet-rice cultivation as against swidden agriculturalists; 'city people' and 'forest people'; Buddhism and animism; autochthonous peoples and immigrants.

Since the mid-19th century, Siam had diverted most trade away from Laos (Mayoury & Pheuiphanh 1998: 52). From 1893 to 1954, Laos was the colonial hinterland of French Indochina, a place sparsely populated and without railroads (Evans 2002: 47). At this time the lowland/upland distinction was not simply one of cultural difference, but was also part of a socio-ethnic class structure. Non-Buddhist uplanders were classified as Kha by the Lao lowlanders, a term usually translated into English as 'serf'. The royalist government that was established after independence in 1954 replaced the ethnic class structure with hierarchic encompassment. All ethnic groups in Laos were designated as a variety of Lao—as 'lowland Lao', 'upland Lao' or 'hill-top Lao' (Sprenger 2004). This seeming de-hierarchization actually reinforced the hegemony of ethnic Lao culture, by prioritizing Buddhism and wet-rice cultivation as the national standard. Yet, besides these open or hidden forms of hierarchy, any kind of economic diversity and differentiation in production involved interethnic contact, and trading with uplanders was an important aspect of local markets (Halpern 1964: 122). Some of this trade, especially in the north, was conducted by Chinese merchants who bought upland produce (Izikowitz 1979: 312, Tan 2015: 7, Walker 1999a: 29-36).

Despite official reforms in terminology, uplanders remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy. During the civil war, the communist Pathet Lao were able to draw substantial support from these marginalized groups. Uplanders fought on both sides, with allegiances complicated both by the long-standing ritual integration of some groups into the Lao royalist cosmology, as well as by internal struggles between upland clans (Evans 2002: 134-136, 144). Laos became a socialist country in 1975. But the equality promised to the marginalized populations never fully materialized, leaving many disappointed (Pholsena 2006, Chapters 5 and 7, Stuart-Fox 2008). Thus, the way ethnic difference was coded immediately following the revolution was probably less complex than the ethnic class structure of the precolonial and colonial period. From the early revolutionary perspective, ethnic differences were merely a matter of different degrees of civilization and development. The current taxonomy of 49 groups, which was developed in the 1990s, is based on differentiated culture traits, language, history and settlement areas, much in the vein of classic anthropology. There is no indication it was shaped by the recognition of trade relations (see Lao Front for National Construction 2008, Petit 2013).

In the years after the revolution, trade was heavily curtailed by restrictions on travelling and private enterprise (Evans 1990: 66, Stuart-Fox 1997: 174-5). However, a country-wide collectivization campaign beginning in 1978 faltered within a year, and the following year saw a limited reintroduction of market principles (Evans 2002: 192-6). From 1986 onwards, the government stores which had centralized trade – in particular with forest produce – were replaced once again by private traders (Yokoyama 2010). The advent of socialism thus represented a comparatively brief break in trading activities, although the structure of trading changed significantly in the course of the 20th century (Tan 2010: 8, Yokoyama 2010: 375).

Since then, privatization and the market economy have been growing steadily, if slowly. After 2010, annual economic growth rates of around 8% made Laos one of the fastest growing economies in the region (Vorapheth 2015: 211). While this impressive figure cannot conceal the fact that Laos remains one of the

poorest countries in the region, local markets have expanded significantly in the past two decades.

The notion of development – which is now ubiquitous in Laos – is no longer legitimized primarily with reference to an evolutionary Marxist scheme, but rather by notions of economic growth and quality of life. The regime of Laos is therefore more developmentalist than socialist. Yet the shift from a socialist redistribution economy to a capitalist market economy, as analyzed by Nee (1996) for China, is not an appropriate model for Laos. For the Lao party-state never succeeded in becoming a dominant redistributive agent.

The bazaars I know best are located in the northern part of the country. But many of their characteristics are found in other areas as well. First, most of the trading on local markets is done by women. This is true for the Morning Market in Vientiane, which is among the largest permanent markets in the country. The same holds for the smaller permanent markets in provincial and district capitals. In Lao peasant society, women do most of the trading, sell food and imported goods from roadside stalls, and also specialize in handicrafts—weaving in particular (Evans 1990: 79, 84; Walker 1999b). In more peripheral areas they are joined by upland women selling their produce. The latter markets are sites of the conspicuous display of ethnicity, as many of the women dress in their specific costume. Dress is one of the most important ways to communicate ethnic belonging in the area, and even groups without weaving, like the Rmeet (Lamet), have created a distinct style of clothing (Sprenger 2017). In general, it seems that upland minorities do not occupy a prominent place in trading over longer distances, despite their visibility in particular bazaars (Yokoyama 2010: 390, see also Turner et al. 2015: 79, 101, 115); I met only a few men and women identifying as non-Lao who sold goods that they themselves did not produce.

However, male traders are found in specific fields. It seems that commodity type, rather than the distance traveled, determines the gender of the trader. So in northern Laos, for example, technological devices imported from China are found in stalls and shops dominated by male sellers. In contrast, on the local market of Paksong in southern Laos, almost all food is sold

by women—including at least one woman who travels from Vietnam to sell fresh sea fish.

There are also weekly and monthly markets in areas where infrastructure is restricted, including the district of Nalae in Luang Nam Tha province, where I have conducted most of my research. These periodic markets were established in the 1990s, and are served by both male and female traders. Goods sold include clothing, household articles, food ingredients and processed food, fresh meat, drinks, daily necessities (e.g., batteries, soap), and electronic appliances. These markets are fairly small – in the period from 2000 to 2016 they hardly featured more than 20 to 30 stalls – and thus do not necessarily create the problems of information flow, which Geertz (1978) found characteristic of bazaar economy.

The second important aspect of trade is the origin of goods. Laos still has little industry, and most industrial products sold in northern Laos come from Thailand, China or Vietnam (see also Yokoyama 2010: 383). Many of the traders have bought their merchandise in its country of origin, or hail from there themselves. This is certainly true for trade in the northern provinces of Bokeo and Luang Nam Tha. Products from Thailand sold on the monthly market in the village of Ban Mo are often bought at a trading post on the Thai side of the Mekong.

In addition, some trade relations do not appear on bazaars. Travelling traders have a long history in northern Laos, and trade with uplanders plays a prominent role there. Trade was one important moment in shaping local identities, and the emergence of ethnicity is at times closely conditioned by it. This is due to, among other things, the ethnicizing of goods. This way, opium was marked as a Hmong product, while forest produce like benzoin and stic-lac was associated with Khmu (Halpern 1958).

Travelling trade takes two forms, especially in the uplands. In the first case, lowland traders contact uplanders in order to buy produce from them. This covers rice as well as pigs and other animals for lowland consumption and more specialized forest produce—such as rattan, as well as particular fruit and insects, the latter delicacies being mostly exported to Thailand. Some produce is especially grown for trade. Once the most important mountain export,

trade in opium has significantly decreased. As its trade is clandestine, it cannot be dealt with here. But legal produce is also obtained in this way. In the 1960s, Chinese traders travelled through the countryside on the Boloven Plateau in the south, in order to buy the harvests of the then budding smallholder coffee gardens.

The second form consists of itinerant peddlers, who sell cheap merchandise to uplanders, in exchange for money or local products. At least in northern Laos, these are mostly men and not Laotian citizens. I have met Vietnamese in this business, but also Chinese peddlers who exchange toys or combs for long women's hair (presumably to make hairpieces from). In Southern Laos, women traders, mostly from Vietnam, use motorcycles loaded with merchandise to travel the countryside for hundreds of kilometers.

A third form, now extinct, relied on middlemen between uplanders and lowland traders. These middlemen, called *lam*, were mostly lowlanders who were able to communicate with uplanders, as the latter were usually unable to speak Lao. Lam negotiated relations, not only when uplanders had produce to sell, but also when they had taxes to pay or otherwise needed to deal with the lowlands. Halpern (1958: 121) found the institution in decline in the 1950s, and today people hardly remember it. Here, a relationship that we might deem to be 'economic' is mostly defined in ethnic terms, arising out of cultural and linguistic differentiation.

In the course of interethnic contact, cultural distinctions that were more or less continuous became intensified and marked by ethnonyms. These then slowly turned into values of belonging and behaving that have shaped and directed the identity formations of groups and persons.

This is, of course, not simply the result of trade relationships; various forms of political domination and alliance also play into them. Olivier Évrard's analysis of Khmu subgroups provides an excellent example. The Khmu, the largest Mon-Khmer-speaking ethnicity in Laos, are divided into several subgroups called *tmooi*. Today these subgroups identify by territory, dialect and a number of cultural features such as dress. However, these features were not the primary source for the elaboration of these

identities, but rather their external relations. The names of the subgroups betray these origins: The Khmu Yuan had particular relations with the principalities of the Yuan or Northern Thai. In contrast, the Khmu Rook, 'wild Khmu' – who are generally known as the poorest of Khmu subgroups – lived in an area that was cut off from the major trade routes (Évrard 2003). In this respect, trade formed important external relationships, thereby contributing to the shaping of local identities. Comparable processes of ethnicity formation through trade relations are known from other regions of Southeast Asia (e.g. Andaya 2001).

If trade functioned as one factor in ethnogenesis, the question is then how these identities are linked with goods. Local products embody the distinction that is marked by ethnicity and ethnonyms. If goods that represent ethnic identity move along in trade, they create a transcultural network of partially inalienable objects.

Sites of Transculturality

Markets and trading in Laos do not only connect the various origins of resources, they also mediate between societies. Thus, the market is a site where cultural differences are articulated and identities formed (Nishitani & Badenoch 2013: 189).

The Southeast Asian massif between China and Southeast Asia provides a particularly good field to address these questions. China's market traditions are expansive and build on a long and well-documented history, and are similarly important in the lowland polities in Thailand and Laos (Tapp 2010). Upland societies, in contrast, refrain from involvement in centralized organization, while at the same time being formed through interactions in a transcultural field. These interactions are of various kinds, including migration, warfare, political control and raids, but also, quite prominently, trade and markets (Jonsson 2012, 2014, Scott 2009, Sprenger 2005). Uplanders appeared (and still appear) as sellers of forest produce—e.g. medicinal ingredients, delicacies such as insects and fruit, opium, cardamom, benzoin and other luxury items (Stuart-Fox 1998: 49, Turner et al. 2015: 60, Yamada e.a. 2004: 437, Yokoyama 2010: 385). Lowlanders, by contrast, excel in manufactured products.

The objects and exchanges characterizing bazaars are clearly more on the 'commodity' side of things. Market interactions are not sufficient in themselves to differentiate the broad and varied type of identity we call 'ethnicity'. However, bazaars in at least some places in Southeast Asia reveal that the differentiation of subject and object, as well as the separation of use-value from origins that defines commodities, is never quite absolute. This is because other types of relationships are also reproduced on the bazaar—relationships of a more enduring and constitutive variety.

Upland Southeast Asia, in particular Laos, is a region where local self-descriptions stress cultural differentiation as the basis of sociality; the modern conception of 'ethnicity' is just one form of this differentiation. Consequently, this has been a central concern for scholarship in the region (e.g. Leach 1954, Lehman 1967, Michaud 2000, Michaud & Forsyth 2011, Moerman 1966, Robinne & Sadan 2007). Many origin myths in this area are concerned less with the creation of the world than with the emergence of ethnic diversity (e.g. Proschan 2001). Cultural identities characteristically consist of the mutual definition of local traits and translocal relations. What appear as ethnonyms in conventional mappings of ethnicity are often enough references to external relations. Words for particular groups might mean 'ally' or 'guest', or they may indicate particular relations with neighboring groups, as in the example of Khmu subgroups, above. But it is not only denominations, but also local socialities themselves, which are produced by situating external relations at their very core (Sprenger 2004, 2006, 2010, Rehbein & Sprenger 2016). Just as boundaries are part of social structure, many of these Southeast Asian socialities reproduce by differentiating – and at the same time relating – the internal and the external.

This is of particular interest in present-day Laos, where such differences are officially denied when they are defined by traditional hierarchies, but also embraced as part of a socialist narrative of multi-ethnic solidarity. While the latter stresses equality and brotherhood, it reproduces hierarchies in two contexts: first, in a developmentalist distinction between undeveloped and developed communities; and second in a folklorized celebration of multi-ethnic unity (Evans 1998, Rigg 2009).

How, then, is this larger multi-ethnic system consolidated and reproduced? I would argue that bazaars are one focus of such reproduction. The observation that most clearly supports this point is fairly simple and obvious. Commodities are valorized by their origin, a notion operative in everyday consumption. They thus represent a rough map of ethnicity.

Chinese have a particular and long-standing presence in Laos, albeit not as strongly as in Thailand (Tan 2015). Within recent years, their influence has increased immensely, in particular through investment, most visibly in hydropower dams, rubber, or bananas. All affect a multitude of peoples, and in particular uplanders. In terms of bazaars, the number of Chinese merchants has conspicuously increased. In the provincial capital of Bokeo, Ban Houeisay, Chinese and Laotian merchants had been selling their products on the same market in the town center until about 2004. By that time, the number of Chinese merchants had soared, so that they founded a new market about 30 minutes' walking distance away. They finally settled, in about 2009, in an entirely new building on the outskirts of town. This way, the differentiation of Chinese and Laotians has gained additional dimensions.

The spatial distinction, for instance, differentiates the co-presence of traders that is characteristic of bazaars. The Chinese market is not only specific due to the origin of goods and merchants, but also in the type of goods available. While the Laotian market predominantly offers food and necessities – such as soap or shampoo – the Chinese market is dominated by household items and electric appliances (e.g., TV sets). The differentiation also seems to have a gendered dimension. Chinese merchants are predominantly male, while most stalls on the Laotian market are run by women. The products are marked as well. Buyers know that Chinese products are cheaper than most others, but are also less well-made and so prone to early breakage. This differentiates them from Thai products, which are said to be more durable, but also more

expensive. The differentiation thus captures ethnicity, materiality and gender.

Upland products also occupy a particular slot in the commodity landscape. Opium, for instance, was once the most conspicuous and valuable product of upland economies. Although its production had been on the wane for a number of decades, it has recently increased once again (Kramer e.a. 2009: 28). Opium is associated most prominently with ethnicities that had arrived from China in the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, in particular the Hmong (Halpern 1958). While opium was grown in the more distant past by some Akha, Rmeet and other villagers, the economy of numerous Hmong villages depended on opium export well into the 2000s. In many respects, opium production shaped settlement patterns, migration, hierarchies and the external relations of these groups—thereby helping to articulate their ethnicities in relation to trade (see Jonsson 2001). The government's efforts to eradicate opium are transforming the role of these ethnicities in relation to markets. So Akha have not only moved downhill since opium eradication measures were taken. But they have also become more dependent on labor. Therefore their identity has shifted from that of opium producers to unskilled laborers. This reinforces the hierarchical aspects of interethnic relationships (Lyttleton 2005).³

But opium is not the only commodity that marks the uplands as culturally different. Lowlanders in Laos cherish the upland rice which they claim is superior in taste to that grown in the lowlands. This reinforces an old pattern of lowlanders buying rice from uplanders—either because the level land required for paddy fields is scarce in the lowlands, or because lowland village economy is partially geared to export to the cities (Halpern 1964: 122, Izikowitz 1979: 310-1). Thus, upland rice is treated almost as a kind of luxury food.⁴ This corresponds to the aforementioned pattern of forests and mountains as the source of delicacies, medicinal plants and other highly valued products.

³ Here it is significant that the Hmong, as an ethnicity who stand out for their strong reliance on trade relations, were quick to capitalize on the emerging tourist market in Laos. Since the early 2000s, Hmong cloth designs and handicrafts, made in a readily recognizable style, are sold on a Hmong handicraft market in Luang Prabang, in Vientiane and other major towns (see also Turner et al. 2015, chapter 7).

⁴ For Hmong rice in Vietnam, see Turner et al. 2015: 53.

So, when rice is transferred to the lowlands, it crosses a boundary marked by cultural difference and provides a nexus of valorization of the uplands. It becomes a function of that difference, and is at the same time productive in forming it. But the better taste ascribed to the upland rice by lowlanders does not necessarily entail a valorization of the uplands in general. Lowland superiority – in terms, e.g., of civilization, religion and statecraft – is not subverted. But rather, as with other value hierarchies, it is only reversed in a minor and relatively isolated context (Dumont 2013).

This reversibility is enhanced by a more recent valorization of the forests, as exemplified by the appetite of Lao lowlanders – especially in cities – for game meat, which is typically provided by uplanders. Although rural lowlanders also hunt, this is not simply a matter of upland forests being richer in wildlife. For uplanders like the Khmu strongly identify as ‘forest people’. In pre-socialist times, uplanders were at once barbarians (Turton 2000) and had privileged access to highly valued resources. Today this ambiguity is reinterpreted in terms of underdevelopment and links to nature as a source of pureness, energy and health—as encoded in wildlife (Singh 2010: 322-3). This double valorization corresponds with the idea that uplanders – in particular Khmu and other Mon-Khmer speakers – are the original owners of the land, enjoying a privileged relationship with spirits. During the monarchy, this was enacted in the New Year Rituals, in which the king invited Khmu representatives to sit on his throne and receive gifts, in order to establish a relationship with the fertility of the land (Platenkamp 2010, Trankell 1999). While this socio-cosmic valorization of uplanders is suppressed and marginalized today, the forest as a source of healthy food is still highly valued. Consuming wildlife has even become a marker of Lao identity, set in opposition to wildlife-protecting Westerners. Here Lao relations with the forest, and with uplanders, subtly intersect (Singh 2010: 324-6). While bought on the

market, wildlife food works like a gift. Its nutritious qualities link it with its origin – as a source of vitality – and thereby shape the identity of its receivers. Through association with the qualities of its origin, wildlife food makes city dwellers new, improved persons.⁵

This way, the incorporation of the uplands and ethnic difference becomes an indispensable aspect of Lao identity, one that integrates a specific otherness into the self. This relationship of differentiated and encompassed otherness as part of the self is articulated through the purchase and consumption of specific upland produce. Here features of dividual personhood – as created by gifts – appear in a seemingly need-oriented exchange (Strathern 1988, 1996). The emergence of specialized markets for ethnically marked handicrafts supports this development—as in, e.g., the state enterprise near the Morning Market in Vientiane that operated in the 2000s; and the Hmong Market in Luang Prabang mentioned above; or the numerous Akha women selling handicrafts in Luang Nam Tha. These are geared primarily to international tourists, and therefore translate the specific identity configuration of Laos into a global semantics of locality. For the external gaze, the ethnic diversity of Laos becomes readable as a market of exotica. The encompassment of the upland Other is embodied in the decisively ‘ethnic’ products available on the lowland market.⁶

The valorization of market products through their specific origins is not restricted to Laos and ethnicity. As Elizabeth Vann (2003) has observed in Ho Chi Minh City markets, consumers distinguish between the international brand names, which are designed to signal global uniformity, and the actual places of manufacture, like Taiwan or South Korea. For Vietnamese shoppers, the places of manufacture are more highly valued as information on quality than brand names. They assume that specific knowledge of how to assemble the actual products differentiates places of origin—a

⁵ Comparable associations of upland and purity occur in the values attached to Hmong alcohol by lowland Vietnamese (Turner et al. 2015: 95).

⁶ Tourism is a particularly elaborate context in which group identities denoted by ethnonyms become coded, cultivated and commodified. As I am more concerned with the way local people in more durable relations conceive identities, the range of this article does not allow dealing with this subject properly. It should be enough to point out that commodification and folklorization are just one aspect of such processes, while identity formation and the extension of local exchange networks are another (Sprenger 2017).

recognition of localized skills in contrast to standardized technology (Ingold 2000). Thus, work processes are imagined to be culturally different, endowing objects with different qualities. As in the Laotian examples, market products recreate a cognitive map of relevant cultural Others.

But in the Laotian case, another level of concreteness is added. Goods like Chinese industrial products or wildlife are only incompletely separated from the personal and social contexts from which they originate. Chinese goods are often not simply made available on bazaars in Laos, but are actually sold by Chinese (see also Hüwelmeier 2013). Upland produce like rice is not mass-produced, but traded by individual households. Often, gatherers and upland producers form durable relationships with specific lowland traders. They sleep at their houses when visiting the market for selling their produce (Yokoyama 2010: 386), or prefer to buy at their stalls. Connecting to these commodities therefore implies a more-or-less direct interaction with the people and the contexts of their origin. These experiences with cultural difference become aspects of the items being sold. Even though the transactions are mostly commodity exchanges, with no social obligations attached to the object, the exchange items still embody a relation with their origin. These origins are associated with some of the most important social categories in this region.

Conclusion

Gift exchange is a central means of reproducing social relations. As such, it is not confined to 'archaic societies', but spreads into all kinds of exchanges, including commercial ones. The example of Laos highlights two questions: How does exchange reproduce a social structure that is partially built on the recognition of ethnic differences? How does trade reproduce the social by means of commodity transfer? A focus on the way bazaars reinforce and partially create cultural differences through goods provides some answers to these questions. The valorization of goods for their qualities and the cultural context of their origin situates them within a cognitive map of relevant cultural categories. These maps differ according to the perspective from which they are elaborated, and sometimes the perspectives are coded into

identities with ethnonyms such as Khmu or Lao or Hmong. But particular villages, clans or broader categories like 'uplanders' may also gain a specific identity status in this way. In any case, they partially emerge from practical experiences with goods and their sellers in local markets.

However, it would be too simple to assume that every category bearing an ethnonym appears as the origin of a particular set of goods —although we do find this kind of arrangement in some non-market societies (for aboriginal Australia, see Graeber 2012, Chapter 2; for Amazonian Tukano, see Descola 2011, Chapter 14). History, politics, perceived cultural differences and modern classifications equally constitute ethnic boundaries. But, given these boundaries are always relational, trade has its place in their construction as a way of relating.

While I have focused on the groups and categories of persons whose identity has partially been shaped by market exchanges, it is also worth looking at the items themselves. Goods pass through a phase in their biographies in which they are subject to a system of ethnic and cultural differentiation (see Appadurai 1986). This way, they become a function of a particular mode of classifying people, objects and origins. The objects gain certain characteristics of ethnicity, and are thus made to correspond with the social system in which they circulate. In some instances, the items themselves represent the category of persons that is constituted by giving them away in trade. The question then is how far does that identity travel with the items? How does it affect their receivers? In select cases, like wildlife food, the commodities influence the personhood of their consumer by linking him or her to their origin.

Bazaars are sites of practice that capture and constitute a selection of the basic relationships of the socialities in which they emerge. Each transfer reproduces a facet of the encompassing social system of which the bazaar is but one emergent site. If the system is conceptually composed of 'ethnicities' — whatever this specifically means in a given situation — then the transfer of items is potentially coded by this form of local identity. For the asymmetric difference inherent in each exchange draws on those classifications that constitute the given sociality as a virtual whole. At the same time, each transfer and each item rewrites the classification and recreates it anew.

Thus transculturality does not result from a 'meeting of cultures', but rather from a movement that at once differentiates and links.

The inalienable connection with origins, the constitution of identities and the influence on personhood which such a system of reproducing ethnicity on the bazaar entails endows commodities with features of gifts. Many characteristics of specific market transactions differ from those usually associated with gift exchange—delayed reciprocity is unusual, relationships between sellers and buyers are not necessarily durable etc.

But some characteristics of gift exchange are retained for some exchanges, especially those that help to reproduce the overall social structure. In these cases, the items exchanged represent different domains of the social—e.g., upland and lowland, the local and the translocal, specific identities like Khmu or Hmong. This suggests that any exchange contains the potential to create social identities and modify personhood—it is just a question for how far in its circulation origins and partial inalienability are recognized, and which values and qualities are linked to this recognition. Gift exchange thus proves to be a source of organized difference. The kind of asymmetry of values and roles that the gift entails is only partially acknowledged in a market context. Rather, the commodity exchange functions to suppress the excess relationships and values that this acknowledgment would entail. From this perspective, market and commodity exchanges are not diametrically opposed to gift exchange, but instead may be considered as specific forms of transaction whose general model is the gift.

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Comments from a Fijian Perspective

A Response to Sprenger's 'Goods and Ethnicity'

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I am in broad agreement with the general thrust of this paper, which seeks to explore the ambiguous relationship that exists between gifts and commodities in concrete ethnographic settings. This is something that I tried to do in my book, *Gifts and Commodities* (Gregory 1982), which was primarily concerned to provide an account for the paradoxical efflorescence of gift exchange in colonial Papua New Guinea as the state was doing its best to turn the labour of Papua New Guineans and their products into commodities for sale on the world market. I returned to this theme recently, where I examined the blurred boundaries between gifts and brides that corrupt politicians and businessmen exploit in Sydney and Papua New Guinea (Gregory 2014). Analytical work of this kind is difficult because one must come to terms with contradictions and paradoxes in the data, with secrecy and concealment, and with local perspectives that provide rival interpretations of transactions.

Sprenger gets to the heart of the matter on the second page of his paper, when he asks 'how does value come about? How is it that the items that are being exchanged are considered exchangeable in the first place? How are they thus related? How are they related to the persons who transfer them, to their origins and to their biographies? And how does this relatedness condition the exchange? In short, how is sociality reproduced as a process embodying meaningful and valued relations?'

The general answer to this question, as I see it, is that values have valuers that are situated ethnographically, historically, and geographically. This is the approach that Sprenger takes in the second part of his paper, where he reports on fieldwork done in Laos. This section of his paper privileges ethnicity as his central analytical category; by locating the main ethnic identities in their geographical and historical context, he is able to paint a vivid picture of

trade, traders and trading in Lao. In addition to this ethnographic description he also presents a theoretical argument about the valuation process. Following a discussion of the process by which the uplands, the forests, and other places of origin of goods are valorised, he concludes that the 'inalienable connection with origins ... endows commodities with features of gifts.'

The descriptive account he presents of the relationship between ethnicity and trade in Laos will resonate with those readers who have worked on periodic markets in the Asia-Pacific region. I spent a year in 1982 studying periodic markets in India (Gregory 1997). During a four-year residence in Fiji from 2008-12 I was also able to observe at first hand the fraught relationship between ethnicity and commerce there. As I read his description of the relationship between ethnicity, use-value, exchange-value and gender I found myself drawing up a simple paradigm of the following kind.

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Use-values</i>	<i>Exchange-values</i>	<i>Gender</i>
Laotian	food and necessities		women
Chinese	low-quality household durables	cheap	men
Thai	high-quality household durables	expensive	men

By substituting Fijian for Laotian, and Indian for Thai, we have a general description that applies equally to Fiji (and India if different substitutions are made). Of course, the real interest lies in the culturally specific details rather than the generalities, and Sprenger's rich ethnography provides plenty of this.

The question that my Fijian data on markets poses for me is the adequacy of ethnicity as

ethnographic descriptors of valuers. As in Laos, ethnicity is an official government category in Fiji. Census data has long been collected using a three-way distinction between Fijian, Indian and Other. Between 1879 and 1916 some 60,000 Indian indentured labourers arrived in Fiji, and most stayed. Come the 1950s the population of Indians was greater than the Fijians, with over 90% of all commerce in the hands of Indians. This excited nationalist tensions among the Fijian population, which led to anti-Indian military coups in 1987 and 2000. This pen sketch is enough to show that 'ethnicity' is a very real political category in Fiji; but this very official and political use of the category leads me to pose the question of its adequacy as an ethnographic category.

Ethnography, as Malinowski reminds us, is about grasping the 'native point of view'. What is interesting is that when one talks to the 'Indians' in their own language we find they have no term for themselves, because they are so divided. The first division is between ancestors who arrived as indentured labourers and those who arrive as free migrants. The latter mostly come from Gujarat and own most of the main commercial enterprises in Fiji. But, if we pursue this sub-ethnic group further, we find that they are in turn divided by caste. Within each caste we find division by family. The end point is the joint family firm. In other words, it is not ethnicity that is the valuer but the family firm, or rather the various family firms. What is of note about these elite family firms is the everyday, mutually-beneficial, friendship alliances they forge across ethnic divides with certain factions of the Indigenous Fijian chiefly elite (who themselves are also racked by internal division.)

Kinship and friendship, then, are at the heart of the Fijian economy. When we investigate the exchanges these family firms engage in we find complex transactions involving whales' teeth, yams and taros, money, and favours among other things. These are valued in many ways which the distinction between gifts and commodities captures, but only at a very general level of analysis; our theoretical lexicon needs to expand if it is to grasp the concrete details. The language that transactors use to talk about their exchanges is an obvious starting point, but such

data must be treated with caution where ambiguity prevails and concealment is a motive.

Sprenger makes the right move when he tries to develop a fresh approach to an old problem by grounding his analysis of value in the relationships between valuers situated geographically and historically. But, it seems to me, the analysis must go one step further to get beyond ethnicity to the family firm. As Piketty has noted, the growing inequality in the world today has raised once again the spectre of patrimonial capitalism. Kinship and the economy are as important as they ever were. But Sahlins' classic analysis of 'stone-age economics' needs a 21st century update. Just as Sahlins' book was based on sound ethnography, its revision will need sound ethnography. But this is very hard to find. Piketty found that he had to go back to Jane Austin and novelists to get a handle on patrimonial capitalism. My suspicion is that Sprenger understands well the divisions and familial values that inform his analysis of ethnicity. But he has chosen to stop at this level of analysis. This is a legitimate strategy in a short paper of this kind that strives to ground high-level abstractions ethnographically; but I hope that in a future paper he digs down into his lower-level material, because such an analysis would complement the present paper nicely.

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Which Market Is It, Anyway? Binaries, Pairs and Lucky Breaks

A Response to Sprenger's 'Goods and Ethnicity'

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It is perhaps Marcel Mauss' study of 'The Gift' (2011), more than any other book, that has furnished social anthropology with a foundation in the double sense of formulating a distinctive object of study, conveyed by concepts such as the primitive and the non-Western other, and equipping the discipline with a characteristic purpose, itself closely connected to the value of conducting a critique of modern living, and its attendant processes of commodification. Since its publication in 1925, Mauss' study has exercised a profound influence in anthropological imagination, shaping it in a homologised series of binaries which – in structuralist fashion, and extended over time – can be summarised as follows: Western : primitive :: culture : nature :: commodity : gift :: alienation : reciprocity :: equality : hierarchy :: the individual : the dividual :: solar universe : perspectival multiverse. However, anthropological theorisation in the guise of the binary coding of human diversity has more recently run aground, primarily because the critique did not fully deliver on its promises.

Since the 1970s, a revisionist attitude has been on the rise, partly as a result of the quadruple realisation that commodity exchange in the West is still embedded within the *socius* (Granovetter 1985), that gift exchange actually displays both agonistic and acquisitive tendencies (Weiner 1992), that gift and commodities co-exist in most contemporary societies (Gregory 1997), and that, in such circumstances, one and the same article can feature both in commodity and gift exchange (Miller 2001; Addo & Besnier 2008). Sprenger's argument, namely that in the markets of Laos 'some features of the gift may be maintained even in commodity exchange, in order to create or support categories of social relations, persons and items', is part and parcel of a wider re-evaluation of anthropological commonplaces, involving the re-casting of old binaries into pairs, and the re-writing of sharp distinctions into complementarities. This re-evaluation

involves a shift away from an analytical and political tendency to cast processes in exclusive terms (*viz.* this article is *either* a gift or a commodity, one is *either* a man or a woman) to one that privileges the framing of social practices in an inclusive manner (*viz.* this article *could* be both a gift and a commodity, one *could* be both masculine and feminine). The underscoring of potentiality is one of several advantages afforded by such a mode of theorisation, for it demands from us that we ask questions regarding the forces at play in the underdetermination of subjects/objects as being of a particular type, and of the relative fluctuation of the strength of such forces *vis-à-vis* one another. Nevertheless, my concern is that such modality does not go far enough in instituting a break in thought. And I have previously explored – from the space of this same Series – some of the key reasons behind the inadequacy of converting binaries into pairs, while favouring a third concept, and praising the virtues of third-ness (Retsikas 2016).

To put it simply, the problem is that potentiality, and the radical alterity it bespeaks, instead of being given free rein to announce themselves, are actively subordinated to a framing device. Such a device is analytically operating as an enclosure that lacks an outside. Such is its success that the enclosure manages to make itself co-extensive with the whole of the universe, effectively reaching into its furthest corners, penetrating into its deepest recesses. At the same time, alterity/potentiality is also made subject to a pre-conceived figure that is itself treated as transcendent. Such a figure is none other than a sociality conceived of as founded on contractual exchange, an exchange of near-equivalences, a give-and-take, a circulation of like-for-like, whether mediated by money or not. The transcendent element, the image of the contract itself, has the unique capacity to sustain the entire inside of the enclosure, bestowing upon each and every element thus bounded

with value, meaning and function. Whether this figure takes the shape of a rancorous or affectionate gift-commodity twosome is not of paramount importance; what matters is the effect of the figure's propagation, its uncontrollable multiplication across all the space available: a world closing onto itself, asphyxiation!

Take a breath! Start again, by reading Ursula Le Guin's 'The Dispossessed'! The re-invention of a compass modeled on the dream of the perpetual, incessant decolonisation of thought. With the help of this compass, we make a break for the emergency exit, re-orienting ourselves towards the very outside we have previously repudiated. Along the way, we re-discover the other as a radical, 'wild' figure that bears no resemblance to its domesticated variety of another my-self. Out in the Open, there is a multiplicity of magnetic norths, each accessible through a diversity of paths. We are no longer on a flat, Euclidean plane. Which direction are we to take, which one is worth exploring first?

The path of the market seems already well travelled. And yet Michel Callon begins his well-known article on the embeddedness of economic markets in economics (1998) with the observation that the market-place as a domain of everyday activity is both under-researched and undertheorised—for it is mistakenly taken to coincide fully with the market as the abstract mechanism of demand and supply posited by neo-classical economics. In this regard, the real value of Sprenger's study lies in exploiting the gap between the supposedly self-regulating market of economists, and the market as an ordinary occurrence of life in Laos—where the exchange of goods, and the good itself, are caught up in the entangled trajectories of a variety of historical and political forces. As in other places in South East Asia, Lao market-places are spaces where gender and ethnic identities emerge as distinct, and articulate with one another in the process of transferring values. In such cases, value is relatively non-alienable, for it is persistently inflected by the dynamics of the lowland-highland distinction. The distinction is as much about ethnic ascription – one being Hmong or Akha, rather than Lao – as about social status, the reason being that highlanders are commonly classed by Tai-speaking lowlanders as *kha*, a term denoting low standing, appropriate for servants,

bondsmen or 'slaves' (Turton 2000). In recent years, Chinese traders have been added to the scene, selling a variety of industrial goods 'made in China', which are usually of low grade, though it is not altogether clear how these Chinese traders fit into longer-established hierarchies. The same inflection of value holds for gender, and this is true not only for Laos. Across South East Asia, women are in charge of marketing goods, especially in so-called traditional, or low-end markets. Women also manage the finances of the enterprise and the household, especially since the two institutions often merge into each other, losing their distinctiveness. In this regard it is analytically impossible, and counter-productive, to prioritise one over another. Commercial and kinship values, their pursuit and realisation, are indistinguishable. To my mind the ethnographic observations made in Sprenger's article underscore the importance of clearly distinguishing between phenomena of differing order. Separating the plurality of marketplaces, in their full historical and cultural particularity, from The Market as an ongoing political project is of the highest value!

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Identity of Traders vs. Identity of Traded Goods?

A Response to Sprenger's 'Goods and Ethnicity'

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In the 1980s, there was a heated debate in economic anthropology about the relationship between goods and commodities (Gregory 1986, Carrier 1996). Guido Sprenger has summarized the outcome of this discussion correctly, and he positions himself in an appropriate manner. He argues, in short, that a categorical distinction between the two terms, as defended by Chris Gregory and others, does not exist. On the contrary, we have to conceptualize a continuum between these two types of exchange. Commodities and gifts share important characteristics in many contexts; differences are only a matter of degree, and it is often impossible to separate the one from the other (Yan 2005). In this respect, the essay is based on a fitting conceptual framework. This framework is of great value for its more carefully differentiated analysis of how any particular exchange process is concretely 'embedded' in a given context.

However, some important arguments for the rejection of the categorical distinction are missing in Sprenger's essay. For example, James Carrier has extensively described the extent to which today's image of 'the gift' is shaped by a specific understanding of what constitutes a gift—a notion with quite specific contours shaped in our time by practices widespread in consumer societies. The historical specificity of this notion highlights the fact that the gift is not primarily an object, but rather the sum of all practices with which it is associated. It is precisely the context of ubiquitous consumption which motivates the individual partners involved in a gift-giving ritual to adhere to the complex rules which serve as an unambiguous determination of an object as 'being a gift'. 'Wrapping' is one of these standardized practices, but at the same time one of the less demanding rules. Many more rules and practices are entailed. Daniel Miller (2001a) has taken this notion to the extreme by claiming that gifting a birthday present among schoolchildren

is one of the most intensely regulated and controlled practices in contemporary societies.

Be that as it may, it is difficult to imagine an unbiased approach to the gift. Current approaches are influenced by the dominance of the commodity form in everyday life. The relationship between goods and gifts is further complicated by the fact that objects appearing as goods are seemingly endowed with properties referring to the gift. This type of 'camouflage' is so common that consumers hardly notice it when the acquired commodities simulate a social embedding, as if it were a gift—for instance, through a 'lifetime guarantee', or a telephone number for product advice ('Are you satisfied?'). Although the principles of commodity and consumption dominate modern-day life, it appears to be of strategic advantage to exhibit gift-properties (Moles 1984, Rus 2008). By borrowing from the world of gifts, these items gain in appreciation and acceptance. Gifts seem to have a wealth of embedding, something which commodities seek to adopt, often in vain.

The author gives a total of five reasons why, in particular, the exchange of goods between cultures would pose a particular challenge: (1) the asymmetry of the gift; (2) recognition of the complementarity of needs; (3) the connection of identity and specific needs; (4) the role of exchange for the construction of cultural identity; and (5) the dimension of things as agents. However, not all elements of this list are exclusively related to transcultural exchange. In the opinion of this commentator, their respective importance is related to different cultural contexts. So, in the example given by Sprenger himself, aspect (4) can also be applied to identities within a society and, for example, the gender order. Meanwhile, aspect (1) appears to be something universal. Exchange, whether of goods or gifts, makes sense only under the assumption of asymmetry.

Despite these limitations, the basic argument of the contribution is plausible and deserves closer attention. Within trade, as a social activity, there is more of the 'logic of the gift' than market theory would appear to allow. Sprenger is absolutely correct if he considers the local and regional trade in his case study as a framework in which the goods also have properties that are conventionally attributed to gifts. It is important to understand how these shared properties become effective.

Here Sprenger's use of the term 'function' may engender a degree of overstatement. Gift properties are not a question of functional features, but rather something linking properties and actions, and also eventually objects. On the basis of the insight already given here – namely, that differences between commodities and gifts are a matter of degree – it is no longer possible to describe one as a function of the other. A suitable description would point to 'overlapping contexts' or 'shared connotations' (Henaff 2014). The anthropological discussion of gifts and commodities should aim at uncovering value relations, which would remain obfuscated in a purely capitalistic or market-oriented perspective (Turner 2008).

These preliminary remarks and conceptual considerations do not reduce the value of Sprenger's contribution. Apart from minor conceptual differences, this commentator fully agrees with the basic assumptions drawn from Sprenger's summary of the gift and commodity debate. Subsequently, Sprenger comes to his central argument, which deserves a more thorough discussion. It is based on what he describes as a 'simple and obvious observation'. Sprenger has observed that the goods on the local markets in Laos are valued according to their origin.

In particular, he describes three groups of goods—namely, game meat, upland rice and mass-produced goods from China. While the first two can be considered as representative of highland cultures, the goods from China are placed in a completely different context. For this, the author presents some additional contextual observations, for example regarding the mode of marketing. While game is sold door-to-door by peddlers, the sale of Chinese goods is restricted to the markets; it is also operated by Chinese. Sprenger's argument

emphasizes this fact: The people from the Highland are recognized as individuals, and their products are perceived as representing specific regional cultures. They are supported by the sale of these goods, and the products themselves are considered particularly valuable due to their origin. Rice and game from the highlands are a high-quality food.

This ethnographic finding cannot be criticized as such. However, at least for this group of commodities, and for the persons with which they are associated, it would be desirable to examine through interviews the alleged combination of the goods' properties and sellers. Sprenger's example would have gained much clarity if he had empirically examined whether, for example, the Chinese – who appear as traders – actually identify with the cheap consumer goods they sell. In a similar case study from the Amazon, Harry Walker (2012) has clearly highlighted the differences between game meat and imported consumer goods. Walker's research thus uses a methodological approach that would have enriched Sprenger's argument significantly. He asked the traders themselves about their relationship to the goods, and what value they attached to them.

In many respects, Sprenger's article makes an important contribution to the further development of economic anthropology. This applies to the rejection of the false dichotomy between goods and gifts, and to the careful investigation of the embedding of exchange presented in the case study. However, to support the validity of his interpretation, it would be useful to obtain information from the dealers themselves. Particularly in the case of Chinese traders, it seems unlikely this group of persons would identify with the mass-produced consumer goods they sell. It seems more likely this is an ascription from others.

In general, it is problematic to speak of group identity without considering the difference between self-representation and representation by others. This also applies to the trade of food from the highlands. Are these traders really the 'producers' of the products they sell? Or might they better be understood as intermediaries? This commentator's plea is, in this sense, for the fulfillment of the article's commendable intention by way of a supplementary study. The embedding of trade,

in its various forms, is an important topic for contemporary economic anthropology. In order to communicate this convincingly, a wide sweep of ethnographic methods should be applied.

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Reply

Guido Sprenger

I am grateful for the three excellent comments that ask both to expand the theoretical scope and the ethnographic depth of my essay. In particular, the comments by Gregory and Hahn draw attention to issues of further inquiry into this ongoing research topic of mine. My purpose in this paper was to ask how those categories of social structure in Laos that are marked with ethnonyms come about. I assume that communication and exchange (as a particular form of communication) create differences between communicating parties that at the same time connect them. On markets, these differences become articulated by being associated with particular goods. Insofar as these goods support the creation of structural difference in terms of ethnicity, they remain tied to their origin and thus acquire features of the inalienable, identity-creating gift.

Gregory rightly points out the ambiguities of the concept of ethnicity in this context. I indeed use the term with some hesitation, even though there are pronounced differences between Fiji and Laos. In Laos, ethnicity is much less politicized than in Fiji. The government of Laos carefully avoids making ethnicity the base for political or economic privilege or for ostracizing, in contrast to Thailand or Malaysia—and there are no parties (beyond the one party) or free elections anyway. While lowland Lao culture is implicitly favored, there are no explicit laws or rules pertaining to certain ethnicities.

However, people often identify with ethnonyms, and these help them in classifying cultural difference. This extends well beyond the political sphere. Therefore, I use ethnicity as a residual category of identity that covers diverse differences that are locally associated with each other, ranging from language and dress to marriage rules, rituals, myths or history. Still, I tried to reckon with the fact that difference-

making through exchange may involve additional categories like gender, class or religion, as well as the kind of segmentation that Gregory mentions, e.g. local subgroups, villages or clans.

Gregory also points at the difference in levels of valorization by introducing the family firm as an active entity. This importantly complements my research question. The kind of categorial differentiation that I am interested in goes along with concrete social alliances between representatives of different categories—like Indian families and Fijian chiefs. A somewhat similar process is found in Laos historically in the role of *Lam* that I mentioned, and in ongoing relationships between upland suppliers of goods and lowland traders. How identity and alterity articulate in these relationships indeed demands further research.

The same is true for Hahn's suggestion to differentiate between the ways ethnic ascriptions are made, and also between suppliers and their goods. He rightly presumes that the relationship between uplanders and their game – sold to travelers on busses and in cars from roadside stalls in the countryside – differs from the relationship between Chinese traders and industrial goods. Yet, it is still possible that the latter identify with what they sell. Chinese often see themselves as bringers of civilization to under-developed Laos (Lu & Schönweger 2017), and this may cover, for example, technological devices—but, again, this requires additional research.

In Hahn's account of my characteristics of gift exchange – which indeed, as he observes, do not only apply to transcultural situations – he replaces my 'complementarity of values' with 'complementarity of needs'. I should clarify here that my notion of value is derived from Dumont's value-ideas, that is, concepts that cover the three definitions of value, according to

Graeber (2001: 20): they denote what is considered good and expectable; they are relational positions within a structure; and they enable exchange. Not all of these aspects are thoroughly present in my examples. But in the case of Lao lowlanders consuming game, they represent a value of civilization in contrast to an equally necessary value of vitality from the wilderness. This drives the exchange, makes game and money exchangeable as complements and in turn creates a socio-cosmic order that informs the concept of the person.

My essay presumes that ethnic identities can be such values or linked to them. There would be, thus, a certain tension between two perspectives on ethnicity. On the one hand, as Hahn rightly points out, self-representation and external representation may significantly differ. On the other, ethnic identities are codes for communicating across perceived cultural differences. I found that Rmeet sometimes use the same pejorative terms to talk about themselves that some lowlanders use for them. Why should they do so? I assume that it enabled them to communicate more easily across cultures.

Retsikas' comments are the most challenging on a theoretical level, and I thank him for bringing up the idea of thirdness (and also one of our greatest anthropologists of the imaginary, Ursula K. LeGuin). Thirdness is an immensely tough nut to crack, especially if the call is not to reduce it to three dual relationships between three terms or to inbetween-ness, i.e. a position within a field defined by a duality. In regard to transfers, sharing has been proposed as a third term that can be reduced neither to gift nor commodity logic, and in particular Widlok (2013) has argued for its non-contractual nature; for me the jury is still out.

Retsikas warns against encompassing dualities that leave no room for thirdness, even the gift/commodity duality. However, I do think that the gift makes a difference, as it opens an unexplored horizon of possibilities. Other than an encompassing contract, gifts are not about exchanging near-equivalences, but only work by stating a difference between what is exchanged.

Equivalence would put an end to exchange. Imagining the social under the sign of the gift therefore deflects the metaphor of a social contract—especially if based on the idea of free individuals negotiating on the market. If contracts specify the obligations and benefits of partners, gift exchange covers this, and also a horizon that at once encompasses an open future and the possibility of ultimate alterity. With gifts, you can never be quite sure what you have created.

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